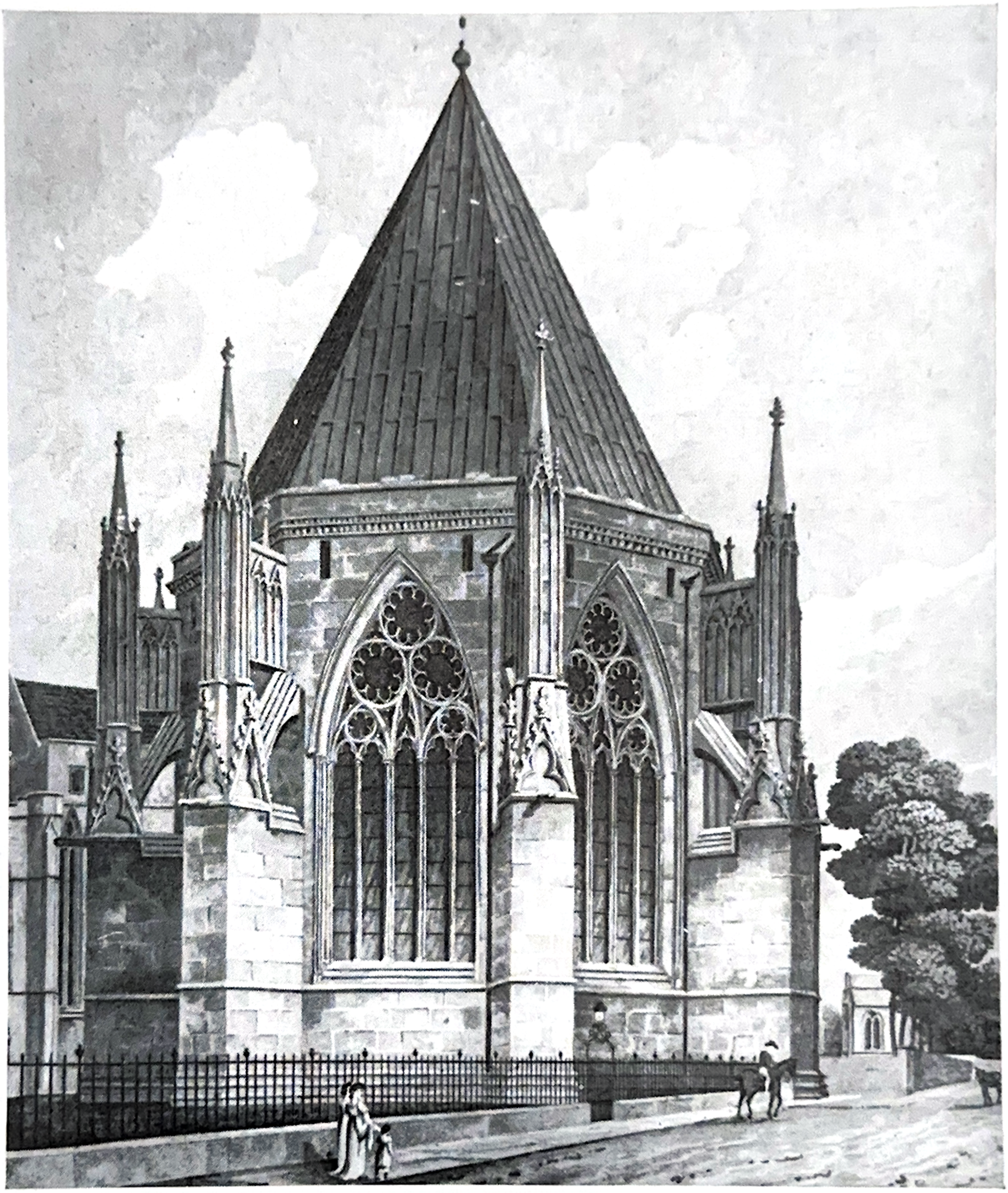
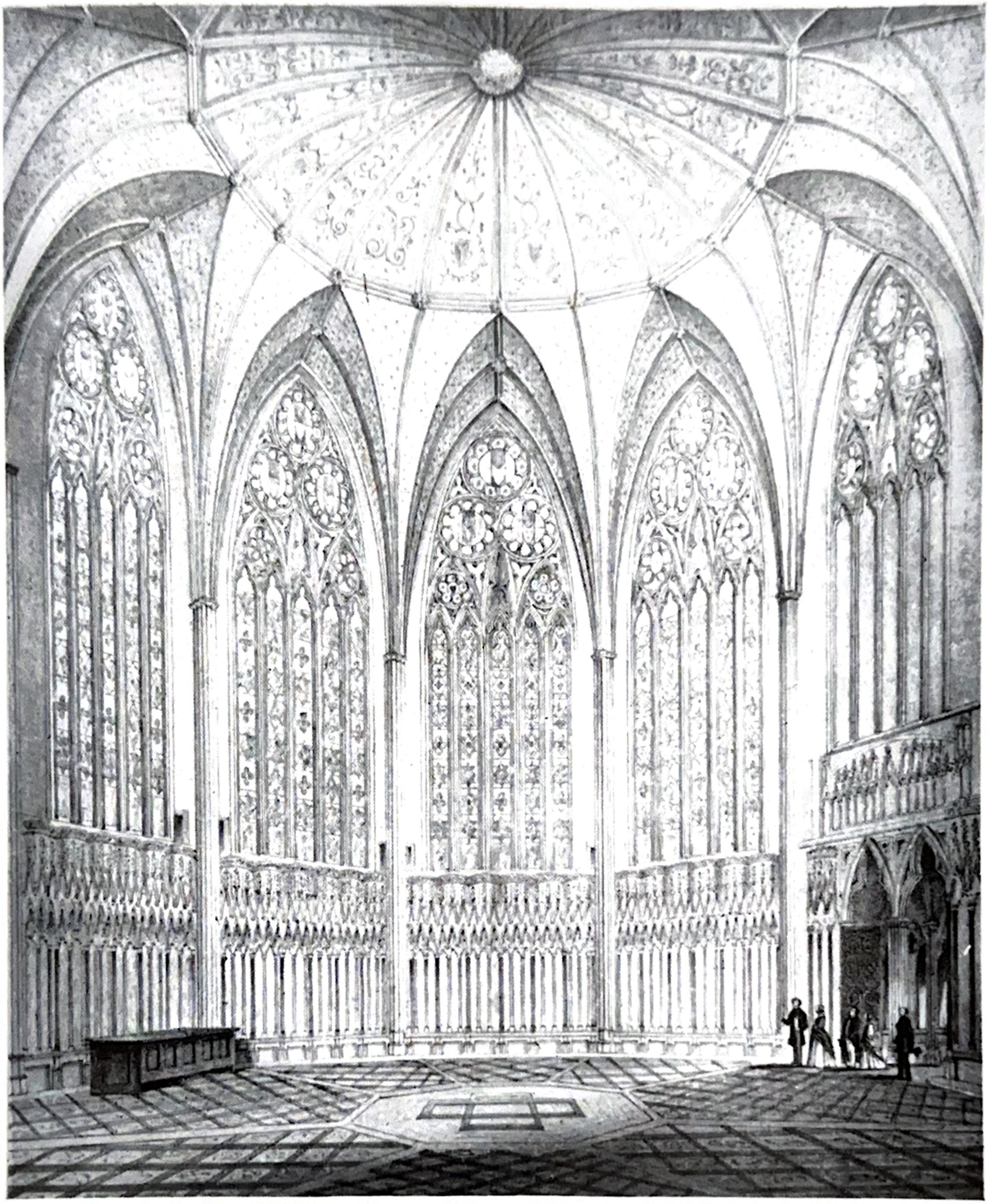
The Chapter House of York Minster



As the rose is the Flower of flowers—
so is this the House of houses



I. Shaw, *Del.*

R. Groom, *Lith.*

Published by John Glaisby, Bookseller, Coney St., York

Printed by C. Moody, High Holborn

THE CHAPTER HOUSE OF YORK MINSTER

Its Purpose and Use

The "Dean and Chapter" is the body responsible in law for the spiritual and temporal concerns of the cathedral church. The Dean is its chairman, and there are normally three full-time residentiary canons, who have the titles of Chancellor, Treasurer and Precentor. Twenty-seven non-residentiary canons are also members of the Chapter. Most of them are parish priests, and three are Archdeacons. Together they constitute the governing body of the Minster. All of them are appointed by the Archbishop, except for the Dean himself whose selection is in the hands of the Crown. They are assisted by Vicars Choral, Sisters and a lay staff, chief of whom is the Chapter Clerk, and a large number of voluntary helpers.

The present Chapter House, built for meetings of this body, was being used as early as 1286, and was called the new Chapter House on 22 February 1299. It was used for secular purposes, too: in 1333 the King's Chancellor held chancery here, and the Archbishop, acting as the King's deputy, brought the great seal to be used by the Chancery clerks for the sealing of government documents. In these years of war with Scotland, York was for periods the administrative capital of the country.

In 1396 the leading citizens of York waited upon Richard II here, and in 1483 Richard III, sitting in the Chapter House, granted the city relief from a number of taxes. Justice was administered here: in 1418 Richard Scrope, Lord of Bolton, and others were sentenced to pay compensation for wounding the servant of one of the canons by the Abbot of St. Mary's, acting as Commissary for the Archbishop, Dean and Canons. A more sombre scene was enacted in 1546-7 when two London tailors, who had been imprisoned for six weeks for heresy and condemned to be burnt, were brought before the ecclesiastical judges here and recanted their opinions in the presence of a large crowd. In the reign of William and Mary, the traveller Celia Fiennes found the Archbishop's mint making coins in the Chapter House, and was allowed to coin a half-crown herself.

The Chapter House is nowadays used increasingly for concerts, meetings and exhibitions, as well as for Chapter purposes. But for most of the year, for a large part of the day, it is open to visitors. The small entrance charge goes to the support of the fabric. Members of the public are invited to linger long enough to appreciate the beauty of architecture and glass in both the Vestibule and the Chapter House itself, and the interesting objects which are usually on exhibition in the cases. Normally there are voluntary stewards on duty who will be glad to point out interesting features, and to answer questions.

The Building

The Chapter House was probably begun in c.1260 by masons who had worked on the North Transept (finished in 1255). The large amount of conventional foliage called "stiff-leaf" and the mass-produced Purbeck marble shafts which became out of fashion soon afterwards, support this date. The first building was intended to have a lower stone vault with central column and flying buttresses, and the keying for this vault still exists. However, whether due to collapse or a change in design, the present Chapter House was completed in 1285-6, without a central column, with a wooden vault set higher and with the original buttresses with an extra horizontal member to give the necessary abutment.

The building is 63 feet across and 66 feet 6 inches high; it has 44 stalls round the inside, with shafts of Purbeck marble and 284 capitals and pendants carved with the stiff-leaf already mentioned and with naturalistic foliage portraying hawthorn, oak,

maple, ivy, buttercup, vine, hop, strawberry, bryony, and other plants. There is a fine series of 237 heads, and under the windows is a gallery with a parapet carved with grapevine. The vaulting shafts have superb capitals and there are 25 large bosses in the oak vault. Above the vault is a remarkable outer roof with an archaic system of carpenters' numbering marks from one indefinitely onwards, using a circle for one hundred. There is a scale model of this roof made by the Minster joiners in 1954. Above the entrance doorway and under a blind stone window, are empty niches originally for small figures of Our Lord and the Apostles, said to have been in silver. On the left of the doorway on entering is a Latin inscription: —"Ut rosa flos florum sic est domus ista domorum" — as the rose is the flower of flowers so is this the house of houses.

In Oliver Cromwell's time, when cathedrals and chapters were abolished for some time, the Chapter House was threatened with destruction, for a man obtained a grant from the City Council allowing him to pull it down to build stables with the materials, but he died suddenly a week before the demolition was planned. The inside was restored in 1844-5 chiefly at the expense of Dr. Stephen Beckwith including the pavement of Minton encaustic tiles and the iron grilles, while the vault (with an infill of lath and plaster of 1798) was painted by Thomas Willement. It has recently (1976) been repainted.

The Windows

There are seven large windows, each of five lights. Except for the one opposite the entrance their date is about 1285-1295. Each light contains alternately grisaille pattern and subject medallion. All the windows have

been cleaned and restored since 1945. The subjects from left to right on entering are as follows.

1. The story of Catherine of Alexandria, a martyr of the 4th century, and one of the most widely venerated women saints during the Middle Ages. In the top medallion of the middle light she is delivered from torture on the wheel which has become her symbol. The heraldry in the tracery of this and other windows is, for the most part, 18th century, reproducing what was there before. The Plantagenet arms of Edward I recur.

2. The original subject, in fifteen medallions, is the story of St. William of York whose relics had been translated to a new shrine in the choir of the Minster in 1284. During the post-war restoration medallions of much earlier date (possibly 12th century) were inserted. They are the two large circular panels which show (L) the coronation of the Virgin and (R) the Nativity of Christ; the shame of Noah in the bottom medallion of the second light, and the Angel in the same row. The bottom row of grisaille panels were also recreated during the post-war period from ancient scraps.

3. The early life and ministry of our Lord, and part of the story of the Virgin. The medallions are in a curious order, beginning with the Annunciation in the bottom left hand corner and running from left to right. In the row above they run from right to left, and in the next from left to right and so on until the last one in the top left hand which represents the coronation of the Virgin.

4. This replaces a window of 1830. The tracery and border are still those of that date. The bottom panel of the middle light (the Ascension) belongs to the mediaeval window which was here before 1830. The grisaille panels were removed in 1959 from window No. 7; the brilliant panels (c. 1530) which make up the two lower rows of figure panels show incidents in the life of St. Thomas of Canterbury and are similar to

some in the church of St. Michael-le-Belfrey. The two uppermost rows of figure panels show scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin of the first half of the fifteenth century.

5. The story of St. Peter. The top right hand medallion shows Peter crucified upside down. The arrangement is like that of No. 3 except that it begins from right to left.

6. The story of St. Paul. The bottom medallion of the fourth light shows his baptism.

7. This window is often difficult to see, because of the building behind it. The five lights tell the stories respectively of SS. Thomas Becket, Margaret, Nicholas, John the Baptist and Edmund. The second medallion up in the right hand light shows the martyrdom of Edmund. The scenes in the first light are under gable canopies—a design feature which was to dominate the 14th century glass of the Minster. The animals to be seen in the centre of the grisaille panels were returned to the Dean and Chapter in 1961 having been in private possession since the Minster fire of 1840.

The Vestibule

The idea of a Vestibule is as early as c. 1250, for there is special provision for it on the north end of the east aisle of the Transept. The present L-shaped one was finished by c. 1290 and the masons went from it to work on the Nave in 1291. It was built from both ends and externally the junction at the angle was badly botched. On the walls are the remains of heraldic painting and the Chapter House doors have attractive enriched wrought iron of 13th century date. The statue of the Madonna between the doors has a modern head.

Over the vestibule is a room added in c. 1330 which is not yet open to the public; it was used by the masons as their drawing office and hanging on the walls are hundreds of templates (pattern for carving stone). On the floor are full scale drawings made by the masons and the room has a

fine early 14th century scissors roof, a fireplace and a garderobe.

The Windows of the Vestibule

The windows are all of the early 14th century. The first on the right as one leaves the Chapter House has isolated figures of saints. St. Peter holding the Church may be seen in the top of the second light. The central light has our Lord in glory and the Virgin and Child. Heavy early 20th century stippling was removed during the restoration, leaving the glass especially brilliant. The window on the left has one blank light. The upper row of figures contains a St. Nicholas, and one of the two Archbishops is supposed to be Edmund Rich of Canterbury (1234-45). The lower row may depict four deacons, but they lack their symbols or any identification. The second window on the right was protected during the post-war restoration with external protective glazing cut to match the mediaeval glass. The oak leaf figures prominently in the grisaille.

In the second arm of the Vestibule there are three windows on the right (west) and two on the left (east). The last two cannot be seen easily because of the shadow of the Minster. They have been very little restored. In the one nearest the North Transept the circular medallions display the pelican in her piety (feeding her young, the symbol of Corpus Christi). The other on the left is remarkable as it is one of the most perfectly preserved of all the Minster windows. In the right hand light it shows the Fall of the Jewish Synagogue and the Triumph of the Christian Church, portraying the former by a blindfolded female with a broken banner staff, and the latter by a crowned female with a bannered cross in one hand and holding a church with three spires in the other.

Facing the West Wall the window on the right shows female Saints. The second light has St. Catherine ; an original inscription under her was destroyed in a stone-throwing incident in 1964. The middle window on this side is the finest of all. It shows four Kings and their Queens. The last window, of two lights, has in the top left panel the only representation of St. Olave, King of Norway, in the Minster.

On Exhibition in the Chapter House

The selection of items for display varies from time to time, but it normally includes the altar cushions given by Sir William and Lady Worsley to commemorate the marriage of their daughter to the Duke of Kent in the Minster in 1961, and an inscribed vellum recording the visit of Richard III in 1483, the gift of the Richard III Society in 1966. Notice also a finely carved 15th century chest, possibly made in Flanders, depicting the story of St. George and the Dragon in a series of continuous scenes.

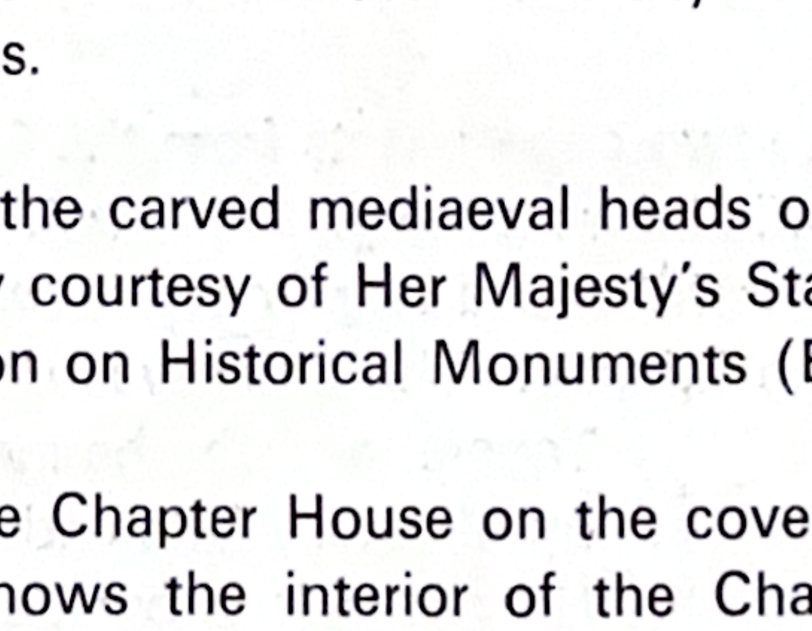
In the Vestibule are two cope-chests from the 13th century, a replica of the 13th century coffin lid from the grave of Archbishop Walter de Gray (original in the Undercroft) and a large case containing the chief processional banner of the Minster. The Case was designed by Sir Walter Tapper, and the banner was made in 1916 by Messrs. Watts and Company of London. On one side is our Lord giving the keys to St. Peter (patron saint of the Minster) and on the other the Crucifixion.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Canon Reginald Cant, Chancellor of York Minster, Dr. Eric A. Gee, of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England) and Architectural Historian of the Minster, Mr. Peter Gibson, Company Secretary and Superintendent of the York Glaziers Trust and to Jeremy Haselock and David O'Connor of the University of York, for assistance in compiling these notes.

The photographs of the carved mediaeval heads on the canopies of the stalls are included by courtesy of Her Majesty's Stationery Office and of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England).

The illustration of the Chapter House on the cover and the frontispiece illustration, which shows the interior of the Chapter House after the restoration of 1845, are both taken from engravings in the Minster Library.



Herald Printers (Westminster Press Ltd.) York